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ABSTRACT

Those who design and develop playgrounds are caught between the desire to provide developmentally appropriate, challenging opportunities for play and the desire to restrict play challenges in order to reduce danger to children or the likelihood of being held liable for injuries. While there can be no argument against accident and injury prevention, an argument can be made about the extent to which recommended playground standards should be allowed to restrict children's developmental play. Safety standards are producing playgrounds that are colorful and cute rather than challenging and complementary to children's development. Construction of safe playgrounds involves consideration of a few important developmental facts. First, children are natural explorers of their limitations, seeking higher levels of challenge that will enhance their repertoire of skills and competencies. Second, what is safe and unsafe to an adult is often a matter of personal perception, judgment, and past experience. Third, children with high and low self-efficacy differ in their perception of what they can do with the skills they possess. A challenge and a hazard differ in that a hazard is something that is hidden, or at least not perceived by the child, while a challenge is something the child may see as dangerous. Playgrounds must provide numerous entry levels with ascending increments of challenge. (RH)

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Playground Needs of Children, and Safety: An Issue in Conflict

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The playground has become a dual symbol. A symbol of creative planning, developmental design, and challenging play opportunities. And, a symbol of token efforts, boring design, restricted play challenges, danger and liability. We are caught between what is developmentally appropriate and challenging to meet children's continually changing needs, and the attitudes of restriction imposed by adults whose judgement may be strongly influenced by liability fears.

These fears are indeed real. As in any human behavior that involves challenge, there is risk--a risk that may achieve a positive outcome, and a risk that may produce a negative outcome. To avoid a negative outcome one should stay within the boundaries of what is already known, what is familiar, and what has previously been tested to be safe. For then there is little risk

of failure. And, likewise, there in no challenge opportunity to experiment for change. With this state-of-affairs also comes an inevitable inhibition to optimal growth development and learning. The implications are important for our children.

Young children are movers and doers. They are action oriented, and learn best through the natural phenomenon called "play". Play can allow children a multitude of opportunities to explore their environment, to seek new ways to create action and expand their limits, to satisfy developmental needs, and to come to terms with their personal levels of competence. The playground can be a choice place to test and experiment with personal limitations.

If we create an appealing, challenging playground we are going to draw children to it, for this is the indent. But, the more children that interact in the play process the greater the likelihood of an injury occurring. It's simply a matter of percentages and probability. We all know that there has been on-going research and opinion on how to make playgrounds safer. Attention to ground cover, structure height/spacing/movement, protrusions and entrapments are all intended to drastically reduce the incidence and severity of accident and injury. There can be no argument against accident and injury prevention!

But there can be argument as to the degree of restrictiveness we are putting on children's play and subsequent development as a result of a spiraling ascent of recommended playground standards. The issue of concern lies with the nature and construction of these standards. While guidelines or standards are important to children's safety, they are also starting to create playgrounds that are only colorful and cute rather than challenging and complementary to children's development conditions. The question is, "can playgrounds that meet children's developmental needs, and playgrounds that adhere to given safety standards coexist?"

We must remember that in our drive to "accident-proof" a playground we may be creating an environment conducive to unwanted risk-taking. When we make a playground too safe and restrictive for use, children usually find it unchallenging and boring and consequentially reject it and actively seek out risk and challenge situations elsewhere, where the prospect and probability of serious, negative consequences are enhanced.

In our efforts to make playgrounds safer for children we must take into account a few important developmental consideration. First, children are explorers of their limitations, seeking higher levels of challenge to promote and enhance their repertoire of skills and competencies. Access to challenge is fundamental to human development (Sutton-Smith).

American playground designer Jay Beckwith has long been an advocate of challenging play designs and distinguishes between "challenge" and "hazard". He points out the following:

> The goal of playground safety is not to remove excitement and challenge, but rather to control hazard. Clearly children seek out and enjoy the stimulation of challenge. [The literature on play behavior (by Sutton-Smith, et al) supports the notion that access to such challenges is fundamental to human development.]
>
> The fundamental difference between a challenge and a hazard is that a hazard is something which is hidden, or at least not perceived by the child. A challenge, on the other hand, is something the child may see as dangerous. The design challenge (therefore) is to create an environment which appears "dangerous", but has been designed to reduce the occurrence of injury. Thus, both a sound design and a realistic playground safety program must be grounded in an awareness of the children's powers of perception and comprehension as they develop over time.

Understanding limits and personal limitations , therefore, can only be achieved if the environment presents the opportunities. Children who understand their limitations---strengths vs. weakness, abilities vs. inabilities, comfortable risks vs. uncomfortable risks-- are children who have had countless

opportunity for problem solving and decision making in which their judgement for interaction rested on a solid foundation of past experience. Take away the opportunities for the child to experience and we take away the child's opportunities to become skillful and competent. Incompetent children grow to be incompetent adults, who, in turn, become inappropriate and nonreinforcing models for the next generation.

Secondly, what is safe and what is unsafe to an adult is often a matter of personal perception, judgement, and past experiences. An adult's reaction to any given interchange between child and play environment is personal and subjective. How we perceive risk or risk taking behavior is determined by our judgement of our own desire or confidence to manage potentially dangerous aspects of a situation. If we believe we have control over a situation, then we feel relatively safe, and take chances regarded as much too risky by those who judge themselves to be less confident.

An aversive or risky situation is not a fixed property but rather one which a person happens upon. Judging the adversity or risk potential of a situation does not rely solely on picking up the external signs of danger a safety (e.g. a swing goes high, jumping from a high pt., a net is too steep), but rather on an interaction between the potential harmful aspects of the environment and one's own capabilities. Thus, an aversive or risky situation will be judged to be relatively safe by those

skilled, but too dangerous by those inept. Those with inadequate capabilities with perceive all kinds of dangers in challenging situations and exaggerate any harmful potentials. Thus, the child's latitude and complexity of play possibilities can rest in the hands of adults whose subjective opinion and action are a result of their state of confidence for trying new things.

A third important developmental consideration is the child state of confidence for drying new things, or "self-efficacy". Children also have a perception or judgement of what they can do with the skills the possess. But, unlike adults, children believe that they can do whatever there is to do, with a natural confidence in their own ability to perform a behavior. This is especially true in the area of motor skills and is quite observable on the playground.

Children with high self-efficacy radiate confidence (in their physical activities) in climbing, leaping, balancing, etc., or conquering the highest peaks, and show strong persistence in attempting to ride a bike or to build a structurally questionable block tower or sand castle. These children freely explore, observe and imitate their environment. They feel confident and are motivated by their trial and error strategies that produce successes. Children with low self-efficacy on the other hand, doubt their abilities and easily quit trying. While children's natural level of persistence may predispose them to either high or low self-efficacy, it is the environment--the physical

offerings and the facilitating agents--that builds confidence and motivation, no matter what the entry level.

On a playground, then, numerous entry levels must be created with ascending increments of challenge. What a child does will depend mostly on the skills possessed and on the self-beliefs the child has brought to the situation. The child's level of performance will depend on the amount of effort and perseverance brought to bear on the task. Strong self-efficacy will prompt the child to go beyond that comfortably "safe zone" where failure rarely occurs. To strive toward higher levels of aspirations by accepting higher level challenges that enhance self expectation and surpass ordinary performance. Children seek to optimize their play outcomes when they have high self-efficacy. Thus, the playground must meet the challenge and provide needed opportunities.

As facilitating agents we must recognize, preserve and support self-efficacy behavior in children. We must allow them to try things that appeal to their nature to master new skills and to strive for competence. If we limit children's opportunities to investigate their environment by being too cautious or by expressing too much worry over their safety we will inhibit their self-efficacy and related development. As custodians of our children we want to provide a safe as well as a developmentally appropriate environment in which to play.

These provisions raise important questions that advocates for the child's right to play must deal with. First, with regard to playground safety-- How much is too much? Second, with regard to the developmental potential of a playground-- How much can we provide, tolerate, or afford?